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WORK OF WOMEN IN THE MERCANTILE HOUSES OF PITTSBURGH ¹

BY ELIZABETH BEARDSLEY BUTLER,
New York City.

The long lanes of a department store are the Arabian Nights palaces of to-day. All that those fortunate adventurers of old time saw under guidance of the genii,—silks and lapis lazuli and gold, quaint carving, rare color, things to attract the eye and delight the sense,—are commonplaces to us, prosaic dwellers in a western world. Still more of a commonplace and often arousing only an impatient thought, are the blondes and brunettes behind the counter, to whom we make known our desires. It needs more than a hint for our imaginations to clothe them in the flowing robes, the jewels, the graceful, indolent pose, with which the slave at the bazaar received the voyageurs who sought her wares. They have dropped the parleyings of a more leisurely hemisphere. They have changed the robes woven of strangely colored threads, for white shirt waists and tailored skirts. They are literal, in conformity to the business-like tone of a western city.

Neither the salesgirls themselves, nor the rest of us, have thought of their work as a trade to which far-sighted principles are applicable, and for which careful training is essential. Yet, from being objects of philanthropic interest, salesgirls have begun to acquire, for some of us at least, a new significance. It is coming to be seen that for permanent good, the industrial worth of working women must underlie all that is done for them; that the collective group of workers must act as a unit, and because of its industrial worth, ask for such change in conditions as justly may be conceded.

In discussing the mercantile houses of Pittsburgh, I shall not

¹A condensed advance chapter from "The Working Women of Pittsburg," by Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, copyright, 1909, by the Russell Sage Foundation; to be published by Charities Publication Committee, No. 105 East Twenty-second Street, New York.

speak of obvious sanitary needs common to many different industries, and within the jurisdiction of the health officers. Nor shall I speak of welfare work as such. Here, discussion may be confined to conditions which grow out of the trade itself as distinct from other trades, and to its present aspect from the occupational standpoint. No attempt has been made to cover the small stores in which five women or less are employed. What is said of the large stores will be, in the main, applicable to them, although to a degree they are a problem in themselves. It is the large stores primarily—the knot in the business center of the city and the scattered ones in the East End and on the main streets of the North and South Side,—with reference to which statistics of employees and of conditions have been obtained.

In twenty-four stores, 7,540 women are employed. No other one occupation in which women work in groups has so large a following in the city of Pittsburgh. No other has within four thousand as many women. Sometimes as many as 1,900 women are employed in one store, wrapping, checking, selling goods, or on the upper floors, engaged at subsidiary occupations, such as making draperies, trimming hats, or altering cloaks to the wearer's size. Occasionally, even a laundry is part of a department store, or again a kitchen with a group of red-cheeked Polish maids preparing vegetables. Or the whole force in the store may be no more than nine and occupations may be interchangeable at need.

The little cash girl in her plain black suit starts into a new world when she enters the store, leaving school behind her. Only a small part of this world is opened out to her at first, as she learns to carry messages and parcels and change, to direct customers to different departments and sometimes, where she sees opportunity, to anticipate a want or to supply an unlooked-for need. She learns to find her way about, to know where the stock-rooms are, how the stock of various kinds is kept, and how in rows of cages girls sit making entries in books all day long.

The cash girl may be advanced to the position of wrapper or stock girl. If she is a wrapper, she will begin to feel her responsibility for maintaining a standard of work. An exclusive store in part maintains its exclusiveness by distinctive wrapper and seal, and even a more plebeian store gains many customers by the care and attractiveness with which its parcels are wrapped. I was told by a

manager that his wrapper girl was one of the most important employees in the drapery salesroom and worth at least five dollars. How quickly a bright cash girl is allowed to sell goods will depend on her size. For speedy advancement, she needs to be well-built and a little tall, as well as quick to learn.

She may show aptitude for clerical work and be turned aside into one of the offices, without ever working on the floor at all. The office work is like any office work. The other departments, that also are away from the customers, however, have a character distinctly their own, and draw their recruits, not from among the cash girls, but from women in factory trades outside. A laundry, for instance, or a kitchen, may be part of a store. In other cases, draperies and awnings are made to order. Numerically, these by-employments are not important, but work in the alteration room is sufficiently distinct to be considered almost a separate trade.

The alteration hands on cloaks and suits, the trimmers of "Parisian" millinery, are 971 of the women in department stores. They produce by wholesale, but after a fashion different from that in a manufacturing house. A characteristic room of this type is one on a twelfth floor which I saw in the midst of the spring season. Bare and white-washed, with windows on two sides, the hugeness of the room—which was a block wide and long—made artificial light necessary throughout. Of the 115 people employed, only five or six were men. From the first of February until June, and from the middle of August to December, the power-driven needles whirr back and forth for more than ten hours a day. At eight o'clock the hands come in and work, with an interval for lunch, until half-past five. Then they go down to the lunch-room and come up again at six, with a stretch of two and a half hours in the evening. They work hard while they can, for in the dull season they lose at least two months by periodic unemployment. Some have been dressmakers before, hand workers whose business it was to know how to cut and fit a garment. They put all that behind them when they enter an alteration room. If a girl has done only individual work before, the trade has to be re-learned. The needles are power-driven. Changes are chalked on the goods, and suits are turned out wholesale for unknown customers. Rarely is an apprentice employed. Busier than in a wholesale house, the managers of the workroom have no place except for those with experience, to whom they pay ten dollars a

week during the season. "What's the use of paying more?" said one, "you can get a fine worker for ten dollars, one who knows how to do anything you want."

The girls in the millinery workrooms, like those in wholesale millinery houses, have their seasons of work. Except that some hats are altered and some are trimmed to order, the work is much the same as elsewhere in the trade, and the larger part of the time is given to trimming hats ready-made and ready-to-wear. The trimmers, like the alteration hands on suits, have a trade which for years they may have followed under other circumstances, until chance brought them into the group of department store employees. The drapery and awning makers, too, are not apprenticed in the stores. Without experience in the use of materials and tools, they could not obtain their positions. All these trained and taught hands, however, are in the minority, totaling less than fourteen per cent of the women employees.

The salesgirls, untrained and untaught, are in the overwhelming majority. Of them, there are 6,534—86.5 per cent of the women in the stores. The material upon which they have to work is the pliant and receptive customer, or, at other times, the irritable and impatient customer. The tools at their hand are the cases of stock behind the counter, the counter displays and the books or cases of samples. For lack of the right word, a sale is lost. The salesgirl fails at the critical moment, sometimes through ignorance of her tools—the stock that she is trying to sell—sometimes through sheer indifference, but perhaps more often still, through lack of ability to follow the musings of a customer who conjures up possibilities, doubts and hesitates. Successful salesmanship implies an immediate commercial use of psychology.

It is the absence of these qualities that we resent, when the girl behind the counter, like the indolent slave in the bazaar, is too obviously indifferent as to whether we go or stay. We expect that courtesy will allow us freedom of choice, but we prefer our purchases to be wanted. Frequent disregard of our pride and of our time calls for the host of floor-walkers and inspectors to interfere. They, at least, do not forget that we need attention, even if we fail to receive a welcoming smile, for albeit unencouraged, we will yet purchase if opportunity be given us.

But floor-walkers and inspectors cannot supply in their sales-

women a knowledge of the tools—an understanding of the qualities of different kinds of goods. Their business is to oversee the daily events in a store. They are to direct strangers, to keep sharp watch for petty thefts, to see that the force behind the counters is adequate to handle the trade. For the previous training of the girls they can assume no responsibility. Neither can they teach a new girl, except by a few general directions, in what ways her stock is distinctive and how she is to offer it. There are other girls behind the counter, but who else, to teach her? She is not often a person sufficiently experienced in buying to be herself a judge of quality.

It is remarkable that the saleswoman, unfamiliar with her stock and her problem, groping for a method in the dark wood of her inexperience, should be even occasionally successful. I do not speak here of the girls who are notably inattentive. In stores with the highest standard of management they are not found, and in less carefully managed stores, a force of floor-walkers goes far to eradicate them. Their stay in the industry is short, and next season they are as likely to be found serving in restaurants or selling tickets in nickelodeons, as behind the counter of a store.

I am speaking of the girls who at least try to be saleswomen, who stay in one store or another from six to seven years—the term of their working life. Ten hours at a mechanical process weary a factory girl, but the fluent physical and emotional poise with which the saleswoman must needs meet her various customers, inevitably connotes nervous as well as physical fatigue. Other things being equal, such fatigue, where a girl understands her task and knows how to meet it, should readily be repaired by the rest hours between hours of work. But when the girl does not understand her task—when she has no training, when she has neither the philosophy nor the personal strength to face irritability and unreasonableness without nervous loss, when she lacks that understanding of the mind's workings which would enable her to say the deciding word, when the customer's perplexity baffles her and her own helplessness annoys her—can her physical weariness and nervous fatigue be minimized when set side by side with that of the operative at a machine? Much in the shopgirl's task of to-day is less obviously harmful than that of the machine worker's, the effect of which on health even a layman cannot fail to understand, but the final effect is no less real, no less serious to her and to her children.

Not only these elements of the environment, however, but the physical elements of building construction and arrangement, are important from the standpoint of the working force. The planning of the Pittsburgh store has been determined by the way the city has grown, has scrambled awkwardly over hills and along the river's edge, spreading out fan-shaped from the intersecting point of the two rivers and crowding into one narrow point of land its office buildings, stores and railroad terminals. Even from the river, the hills seem to spring up and the buildings to follow them. Like the other business enterprises, the stores have followed the slope of the hills. Some have succeeded in getting a flat bit of ground, only to have basements and cellars threatened by the spring floods. Others have been built farther from the river, following an ascending street, which opens impartially on first floor front and second floor rear of the store. The rear of the first floor, below the level of the street, like a tunnel entrance, is compelled to scatter its darkness by the glare of sputtering electric lights.

The unwisdom of using a tunnel-like salesroom is surpassed only by the use of a cellar workplace, in which not even one end is open toward the light. We need not dwell on the stores in which tight-closed basements are the domain of the cashiers. In five stores, however, seventy-five girls are employed to sell goods in basements with no openings whatever to the outside air. An electric fan in such case is wholly ineffectual, either to drive out impure air or to let fresh air in. Upper floors, too, although in lesser degree, are in need of a more thorough ventilating system. To an unwarranted extent, reliance is placed on the chance opening of a window and occasional openings on shafts to the roof.

Health and efficiency in a measure go hand in hand. The kind of efficiency that results from a clear brain and physical buoyancy—the kind of efficiency that even an untrained salesgirl may have—is sapped constantly by the breathing of vitiated air. Efficiency is sapped, too, by needless physical weariness, whether this weariness results from careless building of counters (to economize space) so that the girls have not room to pass each other, and even while standing up are always cramped and uncomfortable; or from the firm's neglect to provide seats, or from the tacit understanding, of all too frequent occurrence, that seats when provided are not for use.

Insistence by managers that the girls shall be found standing at their posts, seems a primitive way to recognize the psychological necessity of a welcoming smile. At times during the day they are not waiting on customers. At times they have no stock to fix and are obliged only to be at their places. That they should have always to stand, seems obviously unnecessary, and has become a point of specific legal attack in states that have built up a factory law. The law of Pennsylvania² requires that "every person, firm or corporation employing girls or adult women, in any establishment, shall provide suitable seats for their use, and shall permit such use when the employees are not necessarily engaged in active duties."

The ratio which the number of seats bears to the number of girls in the stores is sufficient answer as to how the law is observed. In the best known of the Pittsburgh stores, the situation is as follows:

STORE A.

First floor	500 girls	19 seats
Second floor	300 girls	12 seats
Third floor	75 girls	4 seats
(Fourth, fifth and sixth floors, alteration and work-rooms).		

STORE B.

First floor	400 girls	16 seats
Second floor	175 girls	10 seats

STORE C.

First floor	600 girls	32 seats
Second floor	10 girls	No seats
Third floor	400 girls	3 seats
Fourth floor	10 girls	No seats
Fifth floor	15 girls	1 seat

With reference to a smaller store, I find the following note: "Two floors used for salesrooms. Second floor, six girls, three seats. Girls allowed to use seats on this floor, but not on the first floor, where there are thirty-nine girls, eleven seats." Ten stores have no seats at all and in two stores there is one seat each.

Two stores observe the spirit of the law, providing in one case no less than four seats behind each counter, and in the other for each counter at least two seats. Among the other stores, on the contrary, whole sections of the floor are without a seat accessible to the

²Act May 2, 1905, Sec. 7, P. L. No. 226.

salesgirls and at counters fitted out with one seat, there are perhaps a dozen girls to share it. When nineteen seats are allotted to 500 girls, or twelve seats to 300 girls, it would be of interest to know whether, in the eyes of the law, this is provision of "suitable seats" for the female employees.

The policy of the management as to the use of seats, when provided, often differs on first and second floors. Because the girls on the first floor are seen by the customer first, it is felt that they especially need, by always standing, to create an impression of attentiveness. In consequence, first floor girls are tacitly forbidden to sit, while if there comes a spare moment on the second floor, the girls may be seated without danger of reprimand. The head of stock in one department told me that if a girl were seen sitting she would be discharged at once. Acknowledged rules, however, against the use of the seats are few, but in their place is the tacit understanding in seventeen of the stores that to stand is requisite if a girl is to retain her position. Some states have yet to fight for a law protecting women from this unnecessary drain upon their strength, but Pennsylvania already has such a law. Her need is for effective public sentiment to ensure its observance.

The periodic long hours in the stores have often been matter for comment. The daily schedule in fourteen cases is from eight to five-thirty, and in eight cases from eight to six. Two stores not only are open Saturday evenings but evenings during the week as well, until nine and ten o'clock. In one case all the girls are obliged to stay, but in the other the schedule is so worked out that each girl is on duty but two nights a week besides Saturday. When she works at night, she does not come until ten the next day. A typical schedule would be: Monday, 8 a. m. to 6 p. m.; Tuesday, 8 a. m. to 9 p. m.; Wednesday, 10 a. m. to 6 p. m.; Thursday, 8 a. m. to 9 p. m.; Friday, 10 a. m. to 6 p. m.; Saturday, 8 a. m. to 10 p. m., a total of fifty-seven working hours a week.

The time of year when long hours are felt most is before Christmas or during stock taking time in January. It seems unbusinesslike that these night hours should be counted in as a part of the week's work, that the girls should not have the option either of staying or of going, or if they do stay, the opportunity to earn extra pay in proportion to their time. Whether as a matter of health they should be allowed to work for the hours that the Christmas trade sometimes de-

mands is another consideration.³ One store has no Christmas overtime. Its trade apparently has not lessened because of its refusal to depart from its standard working day, but the others have ten days or two weeks of night work. Six of them have a double shift, an arrangement whereby half the girls are on duty alternate evenings, coming later on the days following nights at work. Seventeen stores have no double shift, but require a working week of seventy-two to eighty-four hours.

Seven give extra pay in some form. In one case, "We go down and get what we like from the fountain," the girls say; in others, twenty-five or thirty-five cents is paid for "supper money." This bears no proportion to the girls' weekly wages, or to the estimated worth of her time but simply enables the management to avoid appearing to require work without pay. One of the stores—a five and ten cent store, by the way—gives a bonus of five dollars to each girl at Christmas time, after a year's service. This bonus is increased in amount yearly until the maximum sum of twenty-five dollars is reached, after five years' service. The other small stores under the same name, not only give their employees no bonus, but do not even give supper money for the nights at work. It is in part the youth of the employees, in part their inability to bargain and their lack of cohesion, that have helped to make an arrangement of this sort customary.

Against petty exactions and larger injustices, one store stands out for a higher criterion of business success. At each point in the discussion it has been mentioned, for the excellence of its ventilation, for its observance of the spirit of the law, in providing an average of four seats to a counter for its employees; for the fact that it has no Christmas overtime and is consequently free from the imputation that it asks unpaid-for work; finally, for its standard in wages. The manager says that salesgirls are paid on the basis approximately of five per cent of their total sales. Counters where goods are cheapest,

³The Pennsylvania statute, Act May 2, 1905, Sec. 3, P. L. No. 226, reads in part as follows: "And provided further, That retail mercantile establishments shall be exempt from the provisions of this section (*i. e.*, a sixty-hour working week and a twelve-hour working day permitted) on Saturdays of each week and during a period of twenty days, beginning with the fifth day of December and ending with the twenty-fourth day of the same month: Provided, That during the said twenty days preceding the twenty-fourth day of December, the working hours shall not exceed ten hours per day, or sixty hours per week."

As might be inferred, this somewhat confused clause has proved ineffectual as a barrier to overtime.

such as the notion counter, for example, are least remunerative to a salesgirl; an employee of little experience can be used, as sales are easily and quickly made. A girl who shows ability is advanced to a counter where she can earn more and, theoretically, there is no limit to the increase in wages of a capable girl. In practice, it works out that approximately one hundred cash children and wrapper girls are paid from four to six dollars, and that seven hundred saleswomen are paid seven dollars. No saleswoman who is worth less will be retained. At the lace counter, in the cloak and suit department, and here and there where the selling of goods requires special skill, a hundred girls are paid from eight dollars to ten, and sometimes fifteen, in the case of a head of stock.

In its system of payments this store stands alone. Good physical conditions and fair treatment go with relatively good pay. In the other stores, a raise is given grudgingly and the chance of advancement is slight. The wage-group⁴ of those earning three to six dollars—manifestly considerably below a living wage—numbers 5,510 wrappers and saleswomen, 73 per cent of the women in the trade. There are 1,555 women earning exactly seven dollars and 475 earning from seven or eight dollars to ten and twelve in some cases while the season lasts. That 73 per cent of the women employed should be earning less than six dollars a week would seem indicative of an abnormal condition. This is not the pay of experience. Nor is it the pay for work that requires endurance and skill. Nor, above all, is it the pay for a trade of careful adjustments and adaptations, knowledge of the tools—the stock on the counters—and the ability to handle the material—the potential customer.

The popularity of the work among would-be employees is one reason why the market price remains low. Some stores—and these not always the best paying ones—have a waiting list of applicants. I asked one girl who was paid three dollars, why she did not change to another store where wages were higher, and she said, “the fact is, it’s so hard to get a job anywhere, that when you do get one, you hang on to it for fear you might be months getting another.” Competition for positions in department stores is often so keen as to create a shortage of women workers in factory districts. Although mercantile houses offer but slight financial inducements, and al-

⁴The “\$3.00-\$6.00 wage group includes \$3.00, \$6.00 and all sums between. The \$7.00 wage group includes all sums between \$6.00 and \$7.00, including \$7.00. The \$7.00-\$12.00 wage group includes all sums above \$7.00.

though the irregularity of work during the dull summer season lowers the saleswoman's total yearly income, the higher social position of the shop girl draws to the ranks of the applicants all those who are ambitious for the self-respect that thrives on the heightened regard of others.

Shopgirls without friends or family ties are few. Shopgirls to whom the family tie means an additional financial burden, are many, and there are many more who, with family ties and friends, are yet dependent upon themselves for support. The law is fundamental that the labor used in the production of utilities must be paid at a rate which will renew the supply of labor, else labor must renew itself by preying upon other parts of the labor group; in other words, it must be parasitic. An industry in which three-fourths of the working force is receiving a wage below what is necessary to maintain its standard of life,⁵ is a parasitic industry.

While the factors entering into the wage situation in the department stores are various, the desire of the girls for the increased self-respect that results from wearing a neat dress during working hours, for the social recognition attaching to salesmanship, the desire of many parents in part to support their daughters, and the custom-hardened lines along which a percentage of saleswomen in mercantile houses have found it practicable to look to their own support,—with ready admission of all these factors in the situation to-day, it yet seems not impossible to hope for the gradual working out of a system of payments on a sounder economic basis.

Recognition that trade training is imperative, is the first step toward development among saleswomen of esprit de corps. A trade-trained group of women has inevitably a personal assurance and professional pride, even a degree of cohesion, which would go far to remedy small tyrannies and large injustices that are matters of grievance to-day. One Pittsburgh store has started a course in salesmanship for those of its employees who have the ambition to study out of hours. There is a morning class of ninety and an evening class of thirty-six, each with home work and text-book lessons. The women who go through that course will know something of their industrial value. They will begin to have a concept of justice in

⁵The standard of living among working women is discussed more in detail in "The Working Women of Pittsburgh," E. B. Butler, Chap. 37, pp. 383-400. The limits of this article prevent the writer from explaining more fully here the reasons given in said chapter for considering \$7.00 a week a living wage.

industrial relations. With the growth of this movement among Pittsburgh stores, with the gradual permeation of the industry by women who consciously understand their trade, we may look to see not only a more careful observance of the state law with regard to mercantile houses, not only a lessening of the unpaid-for overtime and a marked increase in regular wages, but a final transformation in mind as well as in garment, from the indolent slave at the bazaar in her cashmere robe and rough jewels, to the trimly-gowned, alert and efficient business woman.